Four ways to fix those shattered nerves

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Body

I finally got tired of the U.S. presidential election blues when a friend from south of the border e-mailed me a link to a Website showing pictures of Bush, Rumsfeld, Rice, Ashcroft and others of that ilk.

As their photos appeared, a rock band called Jim's Big Ego played a song entitled "Asshole." (I gather the song has nothing to do with politics.) The lyrics coming through my computer speakers went: You're an ass hoooohhhh ooooohhhhh ulll. You're an ass hooohhhh uuuhhhhh ooohhhhh ullll. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

And there, on my computer screen, was George Bush smirking, and Cheney with his twisted smile, and even Ralph Nader, with his air of canine sorrow.

I've seen wittier satire on the Net. But, then again, the election has brought out so much anger, fear, contempt and bitterness in people that the part of our collective social brain where wit originates has been overwhelmed. That's understandable, but life must go on. It's time to think about something else.

In my capacity as columnist and servant of the reading public, I have been wondering: Is there a way to get people in a better frame of mind, to relax their nervous systems, to help them forget their political and media environment for a while?

It goes without saying that we should all stop watching news on television, or at least stop watching those awful people debating left versus right. It's just getting us more depressed. But then what?

Here are four suggestions:

1 Read Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Evangeline.

This year marks the 250th anniversary of the expulsion of the Acadians from Nova Scotia by the British, which is the subject of Evangeline, so everyone should be reading this poem anyway. The event itself was a terrible historical tragedy, an 18th-century example of ethnic cleansing, and so a reminder that we're not the only people who ever had problems with an overbearing global empire.

Those are two good excuses to read the poem. I have another, more personal, excuse. When I was in Grade 7, the school I attended put on a pageant based on Evangeline. I will never forget the recital by the participants in the pageant of the opening lines of that poem: "This is the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and the hemlocks." The boy who played Evangeline's father was a classmate named Lawrence Raab, who put talcum powder in his hair to make himself look old. The powder made him sneeze on stage. Raab went on to become one of the best American poets of his generation.

But the real reason for recommending this poem is because nothing refreshes the mind and quiets the spirit like fitting language, spoken rhythmically. There's a good quantity of that in modern poetry, but modern poetry demands that you work hard to get it - which, in the present mood of a lot of people, is too much to ask. You don't have to work hard with Evangeline. You understand pretty much what's going on. You don't have to deal with profound irony or ambiguity. You don't have to deconstruct the language.

What's more, the poem is a gripping narrative, a bit of a wet-hanky melodrama. Modern poetry has nothing to do with narrative, much less wet-hanky melodramas, but why should a reader of poetry deprive himself of pleasure on that account?

There are scenes in the poem that are, as American poet-critic Dana Gioia remarks, "breathtakingly beautiful." Do read this poem if you're having trouble sleeping because of George W. Bush. It will take you into another world. It will rouse your more delicate emotions. You'll enjoy it. You won't be so mad anymore.

2 Take the ferry to the Toronto Islands.

I went one evening when the sun was setting, and walked past the cottages on Ward's Island to a wooded area - a sign in the vicinity said something about "environmentally sensitive" - and then to a beach.

By the time I got to the beach night had fallen, but of course there were so many lights on the island and in the harbour that it really wasn't very dark. The sky had a slight tint of mauve, and the clouds had that pale, wispy quality of floating ectoplasm in Victorian spirit photographs. The water lapped at the shore in a very soothing manner, especially since the chill November night guaranteed no one else was around.

Lights shone in the sky, and it was an interesting exercise to determine which were stars, which were aircraft, and which belonged to UFOs.

They say that witches can't cross water, so taking the ferry in itself was a good way to shake baleful spirits and feel oneself in a more benign place. Nature, in the form of the lake itself, the birch trees in the sandy soil, and the other environmentally sensitive vegetation, clearly contributed to a more serene mood.

It was also important, I found, that the nature in this case was not overwhelming. I am not a fan of raw nature. I don't believe in Mother Nature or Mother Earth. Nature is not our mother. She is our beautiful, crazy sister, who deserves our care and affection, but never any kind of religious veneration. It's good that nature has to share space with houses and mysterious blue and yellow lights, as on Ward's Island.

The best part was the ferry ride back to the docks, which allowed a passenger to get a good look at Toronto at night. This city with its great towers of light is one of the most beautiful sights a mortal will ever see. It will make you forget U.S. presidential elections for at least 10 minutes.

3 See the Foggy Hogtown Boys at Dominion-On-Queen (500 Queen St. E.)

My friend Chris Quinn plays banjo in a five-man bluegrass band, the best in the city. Every Saturday they perform from 3: 30 to 7: 30 p.m. at this pub in a 19th-century building.

The proprietors don't try to make it into an Irish or a British pub, which is good, but it still has a relaxed and mellow atmosphere - great for dropping in for an hour or so on a Saturday afternoon, before heading home for Saturday Night At The Movies on TVO, or some dinner party where everybody will moan and groan about George W. Bush.

The music itself, with its rolling rhythms, and its energetic but not frantic pace, is pure joy. If John Kerry had been able to play the banjo, instead of pretending to be a goose-hunting macho guy during the campaign - and where did they find that goose Kerry supposedly shot? - he might have carried Ohio.

The Foggy Hogtown Boys, you can be absolutely certain, will not perform the song "Asshole."

4 Take in the Saturday Movie Matinee at Cinematheque Ontario.

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Cinematheque Ontario, which screens movies at Jackman Hall at the Art Gallery Of Ontario, has a fine Saturday-afternoon series. I missed King Kong Vs. Godzilla last Saturday, but still to come this month are Charlie Chaplin's silent movie classic The Circus, Danny Kaye's immortal The Court Jester and the Beatles' A Hard Day's Night.

After seeing these movies, you feel like you've spent an hour or two to some purpose, unlike the hour you spend watching Crossfire or some other stupid political program on television. They'll do your nervous system a lot of good.

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Graphic

DUSAN PETRICIC FOR THE TORONTO STAR

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